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ABSTRACT

With the increase in mature, highly (although informally) educated students returning to or beginning high school or college, the need for a system of crediting prior experiential learning has also increased. Prior experiential learning refers to knowledge for which no course corresponding to a student's learning exists in a curriculum, but that learning would be a legitimate part of the curriculum. One system for crediting prior knowledge, portfolio assessment, has been successfully implemented in the communications college at Memphis State University (Tennessee). Portfolio assessment is the examination by faculty experts of a detailed and documented claim for credit. In this process, the student must first exhaust all other possible means for receiving credit. The student then prepares, with an advisor, a portfolio containing all pertinent information, which is then given to a faculty assessor. The assessor then determines whether: the work is college level, there is a knowledge of theory and skill, and the student can apply the knowledge. The decision is forwarded to the dean for approval. Programs such as this, which are becoming more widespread, will encourage many students to return to school. (HTH)

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"CREDITING PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING"

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Have you ever been confronted with a student who already knows most, if not all, of the material you are to cover in a course? If you have not already experienced such an individual, I am sure that with the number of mature, highly, although informally, educated students returning to or beginning high school or college programs, you will shortly. What are your options with such a person? Extra work? Boredom? Perhaps your school has a credit-by-examination procedure which will allow the student to test out of the course. If it does, you will have a system for crediting prior experiential learning.

Although most learning involves experience, when I use the term experiential learning, I will be following the definition established for the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning's publication Experiential Learning: An Annotated Literature Guide:

> "Learning that occurs outside the classroom in work settings, communities, or self-directed accomplishments. It emphasizes performance over theoretical understanding, while recognizing the importance of both. Although the concept of experiential learning is valid at any education level, with or without academic recognition, this . . . (paper) focuses on college level learning for which students might seek academic credit."[1]

I am not addressing the crediting of prior experiential learning for which a course, or courses, already exists in a particular college's offerings. I believe most schools already have means of handling such situations. Rather this paper suggests a procedure for crediting learning when no course that corresponds to the student's learning exists in a curriculum and when that learning would be a legitimate part of the curriculum except for the absence of a recognized course at the particular school.

To help you better understand the situation and procedure, let me offer a not too hypothetical example. A student, majoring in communications, wants to get credit for knowledge he has about television directing. Although the department has a course in directing for the theatre, it has none for television. Let us also assume that it is not going to get a course, at least soon enough to do the student any good as far as graduation is concerned, because of fiscal, enrollment, etc. reasons. In many schools if a TV directing course existed, the student, who let us say, has been employed for eight years as a TV director, could easily get credit through a challenge examination. However, if the course does not exist, in most schools that knowledge is not creditable.

Several years ago, a number of us concerned with this problem, supported by funding from such foundations as Carnegie, Ford, and Lilly and in cooperation with Educational Testing Service, worked to formulate principles and procedures which would allow an institution to award credit for the TV directing student's learning. The results of our work are available through Educational Testing Service's Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL) publication and from the various institutions associated with the Council for the Assessment of Experiential Learning. Perhaps one of the most important documents one might obtain in order to quickly understand, and use this body of knowledge, is Warren W. Willingham's succinct summary of what CAEL came "to view as sound procedures in the assessment of experiential learning."[2] Drawing upon the results of twenty-six pervious studies, Willingham posited six basic steps in assessing prior experiential learning. In their recommended order, they are:

IDENTIFY 1. Identify college-level learning acquired through life experience

ARTICULATE	2. Show how and what parts of that learning are related to the degree objective
DOCUMENT	3. Verify or provide evidence of learning
MEASURE	4. Determine the extend and character of learning acquired
EVALUATE	5. Decide whether the learning meets an acceptable standard and determine its credit equivalence
TRANSCRIBE	6. Record the credit or recognition of learning[3]

How the six steps are amplified and applied can be seen in my publication Assessing Prior Learning in a Traditional State University and the portfolio assessment technique practiced in Memphis State University's University College for the past four years.

Prior to 1976, our TV directing student would not have been able to attempt to credit his knowledge of television directing at Memphis State, except as it fit into a part of an already existing course, in which he could enroll or attempt to test out of, or unless he transferred to a school that offered a course in television directing. With the initiation in the fall of 1975 of an interdisciplinary collegiate structure aimed at providing an individualized, contract degree, the University adopted for the first time the assessing and crediting of prior experiential learning through the means of portfolio assessment. Portfolio assessment is the examination by a faculty expert or experts of a detailed and documented claim for credit of an individual's learning experiences, competencies, and knowledge. It is not a test, although testing may be part of the assessor's validation process. The process, which has now spread to other colleges,

including Communication and Fine Arts, now opens the possibility of the student getting credit for his knowledge of TV directing.

Basically, this is how it works. First, the student must exhaust all the other possible means for achieving credit for his knowledge - which must be directly relevant to his coordinated study or major program. Second, the student, after paying an appropriate fee and preparing an initial portfolio, confers with his advisor or advisors regarding which prior learning experiences will be assessed. The advisor and the dean's staff help the student prepare all the forms and necessary explantions and documentation. The completed and reviewed portfolio is then forwarded to the dean's office. The dean determines who is the best qualified person or persons to assess the portfolio. The portfolio is forwarded to the faculty assessor and the student is requested to arrange an interview with the faculty member. The faculty member may use any means appropriate to reach a conclusion regarding the academic worth of the claim and the material submitted.

The assessor considers whether or not 1) the knowledge relates to the student's program; 2) the knowledge is college level and sufficient in its quality for the level claimed; 3) the documentation supports the claim; 4) the time involved was sufficient to warrant the requested amount of credit; 5) there is an understanding of both theory and skill; 6) the student understands the subject's appropriate method of inquiry; 7) the student can apply the knowledge; 8) the learning is organized in a manner to communicate its value; 9) there is knowledge of the development of the subject; 10) the knowledge is generalizable; and 11) the learning can be related to other fields.[5]

In order to aid in the application of these criteria to the assessment process I adapted a rating grid from another CAEL project which has proven to be quite popular and useful to faculty assessors.

Sample Rating Grid for Use in Assessing
Competency in Home Management[6]

Student _____ Competency Area _____

Assessor _____ Date _____

Instructions:

1. Place in each cell the number representing the student's ability with reference to each behavior pattern correlated to each content component.

2. The following rating symbols should be used in regard to each component:

   3 - Comprehensive knowledge and/or skill
   2 - Knowledge and/or skill significantly above that needed for basic functions
   1 - Knowledge and/or skill adequate to maintain basic functions
   0 - Insufficient demonstrated knowledge and/or skill

	Basic Skills	Theory & Concepts	Methods of Inquiry	Application	History	Overview of field
Nutrition						
Finances						
Management						
Housekeeping						

Total Score: _____

Hours devoted to learning or to practice of the learning assessed: _____

Recommended credit awarded: _____

Level of credit awarded: _____

The faculty member may seek whatever additional aid may be necessary in order to reach a decision. That decision - either for or against the award of credit, its quantity and level - is forwarded to the dean for review. After the dean either approves or disapproves the award, the student is notified of the results of the assessment. Another fee is paid by the student at the rate of $15.00 per credit hour awarded. The Records Office is notified and the credit is entered on the student's permanent record.[7]

I do not know if the procedure I and my colleagues at Memphis State developed are proper for your school, or if you are ready to even consider assessing prior experiential learning, I do know that it has worked very well for four years at Memphis State. It has become an accepted - indeed, assumed - alternative means of credit. It has provided a program flexibility that may be more and more necessary as resources become scarce and student populations and needs shift. It has also proved to be an attractive inducement to many students, to return to or begin a college education.

The prospect of someone recognizing the knowledge which he already had induced our television director to return to school and to embark on a new phase in his career, in our profession, I suspect there are several like him near your school or maybe already in your class. If so, I would urge you to consider their's and your program's needs and seriously investigate how the assessment of prior experiential learning might work for the benefit of all.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jane Porter State and Joan Knapp, ed. Princeton, New Jersey: CAEL, 1977, p.1.

2. Principles of Good Practice in Assessing Experiential Learning. Princeton, New Jersey: Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning, 1977, p.vii.

3. Ibid., p.9.

4. Princeton, New Jersey: CAEL, Educational Testing Service, 1976.

5. Ibid., pp.71-73.

6. Adapted from "The Use of Expert Judgment in the Assessment of Experiential Learning," CAEL Working Paper No. 10, p.55.

7. Ibid., pp.69-71.